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Strategies for Developing Information Societies: the Case of Romania

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Strategies for Developing Information Societies: The case of Romania

Executive Summary

The development of the information society is definitely one of the most important challenges that Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries must face in the near future. Concepts like *good governance*, *IT-enabled development strategy* and *public sector information* (PSI) have increasingly become interdependent and hence, critically relevant, especially in the economic and socio-political context featuring the developing efforts of the CEE countries. In short, *PSI is generally expected to become the future engine of political and economic development as well as the critical ingredient for any good governance practice*. However, weak institutional, legal and technological infrastructure, dearth of financial and human resources, bureaucratic resistance to change, as well as lack of leadership and strategic thinking constitute the main obstacles against the effective implementation of *PSI* in the CEE region.

By taking Romania as a case study, the objectives of the research project are the following:

- Examine the positions and action strategies of governmental bodies, EU institutions, and relevant civic interest groups with respect to the development of the Romanian *PSI*, *ICT* and *e-governance* sectors;
- Discuss the medium-term implications of these strategies for the perspectives of the Romanian economic and political development;
- Devise recommendations for *PSI* regulations for implementing a three-stage reformist agenda of e-governance based on two pillars: robust development of

public sector information and large-scale application of Information and Communication Technologies.

Background

Ten years after the breakdown of the communist system, the process of democratic consolidation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) remains an ongoing task, save for a few noticeable exceptions such as Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. Besides the much-debated economic and political legacies, the quality of the model of governance applied in each country has exerted a decisive influence on the political and economic performances of these countries. Romania provides a critical illustration of this case, but its situation can be easily extrapolated to other countries from the region (i.e., Bulgaria, Albania, Ukraine, or some of the former Yugoslav states). In general lines, the Romanian “model of governance” has been characterized by the following features:

- Highly centralized decision-making;
- Large governments and fragmented administration;
- Unclear coordination mechanisms;
- Strong reluctance to delegate authority;
- Slow, inefficient and non-transparent administrative structures;
- Weak institutional framework and poor inter-departmental communication;
- Politicized law-enforcement structures and judiciary;
- Overlapping administrative competences and responsibilities;
- Shortage of professional and stable civil servant bodies;
- Absence of feedback systems and channels of communication between society and the state.

Recent EU transfer of institutional expertise via the PHARE Institutional Building, TAIEX (Technical Assistance Information Exchange Office), and Twinning programs, as well as of financial assistance for infrastructure development (ISPA, SAPARD) has been basically intended to tackle the core of the governance problem and to move it on a more positive track. However, even in the most optimistic scenario (committed political reform, strong FDI flows, improved economic environment), the effects of the current pre-accession program will start to produce

significant results only in the second half of the decade¹. In addition, it remains questionable whether the present institutional framework can resist the pressure of a sudden import of EU assistance, without solid preparation.

Current Situation

A close survey of the main Romanian institutions shows that neither public access to information, nor e-governance scores high as political priority. While most of public institutions have reached a moderate operational status in informative terms, none of them except for the Chamber of Deputies and the Minister of Communications and Information Technology is yet prepared to enter into the consultation phase. The active participation stage remains out of reach for all of them, at least in the medium-term. Moreover, the adoption of the Law of Classified Information might aggravate even further the current situation since most of its provisions regarding the definitions of state and professional secrets cancel out the rights and terms of the Law regarding the access to public information.

Besides these factors, two other important variables have had a decisive role in the failure to act decisively on the ICT front: *the institutional framework* and *the policy context*. The first one refers to the following issues:

- Exaggerate number of authorities involved
- Institutional instability
- Invisible leadership and strategic thinking
- Overlapping and/or unclear competence and responsibility boundaries
- No real strategy to bridge the communication gap between the various actors
- Inadaptability of the actors to reach constructive compromise on their agendas

As a final observation, central institutions seem though to perform much better from an IT viewpoint than the local administrations, fact that highlights the digital divide growing fast between the capital and the regional and local bodies.

¹ EU Directorate General for Economic and Financial Affairs, "The economic impact of enlargement," *Enlargement Papers*,

Objectives and Case Study

By taking Romania as a case study, the objectives of the research project are the following:

- Examine the positions and action strategies of governmental bodies, EU institutions, and relevant civic interest groups with respect to the development of the Romanian *PSI*, *ICT* and *e-governance* sectors;
- Assess the degree of public access to information from Romanian state institutions;
- Discuss the medium-term implications of these strategies for the perspectives of the Romanian economic and political development;
- Devise recommendations for *PSI* regulations;
- Develop a policy paper on program strategies in the field of *PSI* policy.

Although focused on the Romanian *PSI* sector, the policy paper is intended to serve more broadly as background material for policy recommendations to other countries from the region. The paper concludes with a triple set of policy recommendations (with regard to the institutional framework, the policy context, and the ICT infrastructure) for implementing a three-stage reformist agenda of e-governance based on two pillars: robust development of public sector information and large-scale application of Information and Communication Technologies.

Assessment of Alternatives

The alternative to clarifying professionally the information mismanagement and communication gaps between the main actors involved in the development of the information society and to suggesting accordingly possible remedies, is at best represented by the status quo performance,

characterized by political indifference, communication strangulation and economic stagnation. The consequences could be:

- ✓ Draining away valuable financial and human resources through the pursuit of separate, uncoordinated strategies by the main actors involved;
- ✓ Lacking support for implementation as a result of neglecting the interests of the affected groups in the policy formulation phase;
- ✓ Creating incentives for corruption by jamming the official channels of communication;
- ✓ Widening the IT and economic gap between Romania and the other accession countries from the region;
- ✓ Failing to mobilize public awareness about the economic and social changes entailed by the information society.

Policy Recommendations

In institutional terms, the study recommends the following measures:

- Establishing a single executive umbrella organization, *the Information Society Action Group – ISAG* with the task to promote, coordinate and implement IS efforts at the national level.
- Creation of a *Steering Council (SC)* affiliated to ISAG, composed of the main representatives of the private sector, IT associations, public administration, NGOs and professional organizations; the role of SC is to serve ISAG as a transparent and non-politicized platform.
- Appointment by ISAG of *Chief Information Officers (CIO)* (or e-Envoys) in every important central public administration unit.

In legislative and policy terms, the paper suggests Romanian authorities to:

- Amend existing legislative shortcomings such as the Draft Law of Classified Information, the law regarding access to public information, as well as the main pieces of legislation governing the public administration realm.

- ❑ Consolidate the PSI and ICT legislative framework by streamlining the current regulatory system governing the PSI sector and by building a self-sustainable system of dealing with the current and foreseeable limits of Romanian Information Society.
- ❑ Introducing and enforcing a code of e-practice across the main units of public administration.

In more technical terms, the paper advances a multiple set of targets to be achieved for upgrading the ICT infrastructure as well as for improving the quality of on-line delivery of public services.

Implementation

In view of the successful ICT experience of countries like Canada, US, UK, Singapore, Norway or Estonia, it is safe to claim the reform objectives recommended by the paper can be reached within a reasonable horizon of time (3-5 years) provided that the level of political support, capital of expert knowledge, and allocation of financial resources multiply by at least a factor of three from the existing levels over the next five years.